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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HELSINKI 001139

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ELAB](#) [PINR](#) [FI](#)

SUBJECT: EVERY FINN'S PRESIDENT: WHY TARJA HALONEN REMAINS SO POPULAR

REF: HELSINKI 920

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) Social Democratic President Tarja Halonen remains enormously popular in Finland, and polls consistently predict that she will easily win a second term in January's election. Halonen's left-wing base remains rock solid and her appeal across party lines is the object of great envy. Finland's first female president, Halonen is admired more for her image as Every Finn's President than for any specific policy initiative or success. Most Finns credit her for being a non-partisan dedicated to promoting Finnish political interests abroad and to delivering a broad social welfare package at home, although her distaste for globalization draws criticism from business leaders. As resounding as Halonen's second-term victory is likely to be, it will have to cast a long shadow to impact decisively the parliamentary elections of March 2007. It will also do little to alter bilateral relations with the U.S. Differences over climate change and Guantanamo will linger. Halonen will urge caution on Finnish security policy (especially NATO) and typically fall in line with EU positions when Brussels and Washington differ. Finland under Halonen will not send troops to Iraq, but will continue to contribute to Iraqi reconstruction in other ways. And on nearly all other issues of concern to the U.S., Halonen will remain a social democratic leader in Europe with whom the U.S. can work. End Summary.

A Big Lead Based on Wide Appeal

12. (U) Recent results in Germany and Poland (and early polls in France and Sweden) notwithstanding, Finland continues to gainsay the thesis that left-of-center parties are in trouble across Europe. With presidential elections less than 4 months away, Social Democratic Party (SDP) Presidential incumbent Tarja Halonen enjoys a dominant lead. According to a late September Finland-Gallup poll, support for Halonen now tops 58 percent, and her nearest rivals -- Center Party (CEN) Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and (CONS) Conservative Candidate Sauli Niinisto -- trail badly at 17 and 20 percent, respectively. Some leveling will likely occur before the election, but many observers now predict that Halonen could become the first Finnish candidate to win a presidential election in the first round.

13. (SBU) Halonen's heady poll numbers are based on rock-solid support from her left-wing political base and on significant advantages among women and union members. On the left, Halonen enjoys near-unanimous support within the SDP, which accounts for about 25 percent of all voters. In addition, the Left Alliance and the Greens are largely behind her. The former is running no candidate of its own and is campaigning openly for Halonen, while the latter's own presidential candidate told PolChief she expects many Greens to vote Halonen in the first round, and nearly all to do so in the second. Among women, more than 70 percent support the president, and political leaders across the spectrum have admitted to us that while party discipline remains relatively strong among men, it is not so among women. Indeed, polls show that fewer than 50 percent of men support Halonen; however, while all parties are aware of this "gender gap," the SDP has not yet found a way to remedy it, nor have the others found a good way to exploit it. A parliamentary deputy (a woman) from the Swedish People's Party (RKP) explained the phenomenon by noting that Finland was the first European country to grant women full suffrage (in 1907) and, as its first female president, Halonen has indeed been a source of pride to women voters. (It helps, she added, that some women are "tired of seeing boring old men run the country.") Organized labor, meanwhile, is so firmly behind the President that the Central Organization of Finnish Labor Unions (SAK) abandoned its past practice of donating funds to candidates from all three major parties, and will only support Halonen.

14. (SBU) In addition to her strong support from women and the left, Halonen's much-envied ability to attract cross-party votes has thwarted opponents' strategies. According to one of Niinisto's senior campaign advisors, Halonen's appeal has undermined his efforts to unite CEN and CONS voters in an effort to force a second round. As another

CONS strategist put it, "In Europe they talk about 'anti-socialist' unions of right and center parties, but we haven't been able to make that work" in Finland. As another example, one RKP parliamentarian said she fears Halonen will further the erosion in support suffered by her party during the last presidential/parliamentary election cycle.

#### Nothing Flashy, No Mistakes

15. (SBU) At first glance, some might question how Halonen has managed to amass such a lead, given that most observers are unable to point to any earth-shaking policy initiatives or political victories as the basis for her popularity. In both foreign and domestic policy, she has been competent and generally successful. Finns credit Halonen for raising Finland's profile in the EU, and perceptions are that she has established a productive dialogue with Russia's Vladimir Putin which actually benefits Finland. Her staunch opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq -- while never used for blatant political purposes as occurred in Germany -- has been recognized and appreciated by voters. Domestically, Halonen has unflinchingly defended Finland's welfare state model, and six years of good economic times (with GDP growth above the EU norm) have ensured continued delivery of generous benefits while also allowing the GOF to forestall any controversial or painful reforms. Still, even supporters admit that while Halonen has been steady and reliable, none of these efforts has been visionary or overly bold.

16. (SBU) Opponents, meanwhile, seem to gain little traction, even when their criticisms are valid. On social welfare, for example, most analysts know reforms are necessary; under Halonen, however, the SDP has so far avoided addressing seriously Finland's medium- and long-term structural problems and has offered no answers to a looming demographic crisis. In this regard, critics say, the president is popular for the moment with average Finns, but perhaps shortsighted or even somewhat opportunistic as concerns the long-term. Business leaders, meanwhile, sharply criticize Halonen's clear reluctance to promote robust global trade. While recognizing that she has made efforts abroad to promote Finland politically, they argue that her anti-globalization agenda has, in fact, limited her ability to promote Finnish interests fully. (Ironically, despite Halonen's popularity among women, female entrepreneurs as a group have not flourished.) Even in foreign policy -- considered one of her strong suits -- some say Halonen is at times unrealistic, particularly in her go-slow approach to security policy.

17. (SBU) The validity of these criticisms notwithstanding, Halonen's opponents still struggle to find the issues that resonate with voters. One anecdote is revealing: A widely-read news magazine recently ran a feature in which it specifically asked all seven of Halonen's opponents to identify her greatest mistake or shortcoming, four (including Vanhanen and Niinisto) offered no answer. Their non-response says much about Finnish consensus-style politics and candidates' refusal to engage in U.S.-style punching below the belt, to be sure. However, it also suggests that Halonen has performed very well in office, if unspectacularly, and that her record offers no real gaffs or gaps that her rivals find they can easily exploit. Niinisto, for example, has pressed a debate on security policy that has generated countless headlines and widespread debate within Finland's political class. However, his criticisms have stung Vanhanen more than Halonen, even though the prime minister's camp has engaged skillfully on the matter. Meanwhile, Vanhanen's role as PM and his current partnership with the president in running the country prevent him from going heavily on the attack. Several of Halonen's opponents have floated variations of the "Halonen has done nothing wrong, because she has done nothing" theme (see ref tel A), but as catchy as that phrase might be, voters appear unmoved.

#### A Carefully Crafted Image

18. (SBU) If Halonen's competent but unflashy performance in office offers few political vulnerabilities, her image -- also competent and decidedly unflashy -- marks the real foundation of her popularity. Halonen skillfully markets herself, at turns, as a tough ex-labor lawyer; a capable but humble international diplomat; the archetypical Finnish "self-made" political leader; and the kindly neighbor lady whom any Finn can approach for a favor or a chat. The President's working class family background; her years of service as an SAK labor confederation attorney; her unexpected success as foreign minister in the late 1990s; and her modest apartment in a working class Helsinki neighborhood (which she rents out while occupying the Presidential Palace) all bolster these impressions in voters' eyes. Indeed, she is often described as the true "Every Finn's President," aloof from partisan politics,

accessible and pro-Finland -- but tough when necessary.

19. (SBU) This multi-layered image is as much the stuff of reality as of presentation. As a leader, Halonen truly eschews partisan politics and works to build bridges -- a *modus operandi* that has served her very well. According to a top advisor to PM Vanhanen, no president in Finland's history has forged such a productive and cooperative relationship with the PM's office, even during previous administrations when both were from the same party. However, he lamented, the two are now political rivals, and their close cooperation has bolstered support for the president at Vanhanen's expense. "When the President and the PM both look good," he said, "the President always looks better."

10. (SBU) At the same time, Halonen is not above well-placed use of theatrics. She is the first Finnish president to consistently speak "puhekieli" (everyday spoken Finnish) in public, as opposed to "kirjakieli" (very formal Finnish typically used only in writing and on television and radio). This emphasizes humble roots and her apparent accessibility to all Finns. She is also among the first Finnish politicians to enlist celebrity support -- a new campaign tactic here but one sure to spread quickly. Meanwhile, there was the famous incident in which she straightened President Bush's tie in front of TV cameras during the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council meeting in Turkey in 2003. Pundits continue to debate whether or not this stunt represented a victory for Halonen's image or a liability. However, for every opponent who tries to ridicule the tie-straightening episode as mere pageantry (and they were right; there was no substantive exchange between the two presidents), there is a supporter who argues that voters view it as an indication that the President is comfortable among and capable of dealing with leaders of the world's great powers.

Halonen Term II: Implications for the U.S.

11. (SBU) Regardless of how resounding her victory may be in January, Tarja Halonen's re-election will do little to alter the positive tenor of U.S.-Finnish relations. As her support base would indicate, Halonen heads the left faction of her already left-of-center party, in a Nordic welfare state where skepticism toward many current U.S. policies is deeply entrenched across the political spectrum. However, it is important to underscore that skepticism does not mean uncooperativeness. Finnish leaders have a long history of coexisting peacefully -- even cooperating warmly -- with large superpowers, and there is no reason to expect anything different from Halonen the second time around.

12. (SBU) In addition, while the direction of Finland's foreign policy may be influenced or even set by the President, Government must carry policy out, making the March 2007 parliamentary elections more important than January's results. Some have suggested that a big first round win for Halonen could translate into a big victory for the SDP in 2007, or that a distant third-place finish for either Vanhanen or Niinisto will spell doom for CEN or CONS. We dispute the former theory, both on the grounds that Halonen's win would have to cast an unrealistically long shadow and because the SDP may be facing some of its own internal problems (septel). The latter theory may hold more water, but in the end Vanhanen and Niinisto are likely to finish so far behind -- but so close to one another -- that the implications for their respective parties more than a year later will be minimal.

13. (SBU) What all this will mean in practice depends on the issue. Within Europe, Halonen will prefer a go-slow approach to Finland's NATO membership. (Halonen campaigned on a "no NATO" platform in 2000 but, as the current vocal security debate continues, the public posture appears to have softened slightly and we doubt she will make any sort of anti-NATO stance part of her campaign this time.) She will rarely diverge from European consensus and will seldom advocate Finland's taking a clear lead on issues -- although we should expect the GOF to use its EU presidency in the second half of 2006 to forward some initiatives, including anti-trafficking in persons; sustainable development and energy efficiency; European dialogue with Russia, and potentially some sort of role in Ukraine, Belarus or the Caucasus. As for issues that divide the EU, Halonen will always look toward Brussels before looking to Washington.

14. (SBU) Further afield, Finnish boots on the ground in Iraq will remain a non-starter, although GOF non-military contributions in Iraq are certain to continue. The GOF will remain deeply troubled by the U.S. handling of the situation in Guantanamo and by its perception that U.S. policy continues largely to ignore the reality of climate change. However, these are not Halonen-specific problems;

they would be contentious issues regardless of who is elected president. For the other key items on our broad shared agenda -- including fostering democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere; crisis management, humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping; human rights; trafficking in persons; trans-Atlantic dialogue -- we can count on Finland during a second Halonen term to be a reliable and proactive partner.

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